

JANE AUSTEN, MARRIAGE, AND EMMA

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A MASTER'S REPORT

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

College of Arts and Sciences

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY  
Manhattan, Kansas

1987

Approved by:

  
Major Professor

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Jane Austen's novel Emma opens with a scene in which Emma Woodhouse and her father consider the effects of the marriage of Emma's long-time governess, Miss Taylor, to Mr. Weston. As the story progresses Emma encourages Harriet Smith to reject the proposal of Robert Martin, tries to promote a marriage between Harriet and Mr. Elton, and rejects a marriage proposal from Mr. Elton. Emma fantasizes about a marriage between herself and Frank Churchill, and then between Frank Churchill and Harriet Smith. Emma also observes and meditates on the marriages around her, especially those of the Eltons, the Westons, and the John Knightleys. The novel concludes with the September wedding of Harriet Smith and Robert Martin, the October wedding of Emma and Mr. George Knightley, and the anticipated wedding of Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill in November.

Clearly marriages and talk of marriages pervade this novel. And when we take into account both the number of marriages at the novel's end and the novel's account of the alternatives to marriage available to a young woman of the class from which Jane Austen and most of her original

readers came<sup>1</sup>--to remain dependent upon her family as an "old maid" or to attempt to earn a meager salary as a governess--we might conclude that the novel is, at least in part, a tract urging all to marry. But Austen is, in fact, ambivalent about marriage. This ambivalence is present in Emma's thinking about marriage. Although Emma is eager to do what she can to facilitate the marriages of others, she resists the idea that she should marry. When the novel opens, Emma's observations of the marriages of others have led her to the conclusion that none of the couples have what she would want for herself in a marriage. This ambivalence is, no doubt, partly the result of Emma's self-delusions. But it also owes much to the problems which Jane Austen saw with the institution of marriage. If, as I shall argue, Emma's conclusions are accurate reflections of Austen's own opinion of marriage and most marriages, why does Austen nevertheless end the novel by having Emma marry Mr. Knightley? The reader of the novel might well like to ask Jane Austen a question similar to Emma's when she asked her father, "My dear papa, you are no friend of matrimony and therefore why should you be so anxious to pay your respects to a bride?"<sup>2</sup>

In order to try to answer this question, I will first examine the novel itself to determine what Emma thinks and says about marriage. What does Emma consider as she evaluates the marriages of others and what she would want in

her own marriage? What qualities does she think are desirable in a mate? Next, I will look at Austen's presentation of both Emma and Mr. Knightley. Since Emma is the story's heroine and Mr. Knightley is revealed to be her ideal husband, we might expect them to embody those qualities which Austen thought essential to mature adults. Therefore, what qualities does Austen ascribe to them? What does she see as necessary to the "perfect happiness of the union"?

After examining Emma, I will consider what we can determine about Austen's opinion of marriage through a reading of her surviving letters. Her letters to her sister Cassandra reveal that Austen was an astute observer of those around her and she was aware of the interests and concerns of women in their everyday lives. Of special interest are several letters from Austen to her niece Fanny Knight in which Austen replies to Fanny's requests for advice. Austen's responses reveal the qualities she considered important in the young men. Her advice to Fanny is similar to Emma's advice to Harriet. This suggests that Austen's letters and other information about the historical context of Emma can be used to further illuminate the discussion of marriage in the novel.

Finally, I will consider the problematic ending of the novel--whether the marriage of Emma and Mr. Knightley conflicts with the presentation of marriage in the novel. The appropriateness of the marriage will be examined in

terms of various ways of reading the novel. If the novel is seen primarily as a comedy, the formal ending, the marriage of the hero and heroine, the resolution of conflict is appropriate. However, many readers have found the ending inappropriate. They see the realistic elements of the novel as more significant than its comic genre; therefore, they believe that Emma's reward is much greater than she deserves because of her immature behavior. Such a reaction to the ending ignores the theme of the novel--Emma's maturation and realization of her proper role in society. In this context their marriage might be seen as an appropriate indicator of the mature relationship achieved by Emma and Mr. Knightley. But whether Jane Austen really believed that the marriage would result in "perfect happiness" is another question. Austen's handling of the story's ending suggests that she does not take the "fairy tale" ending seriously as a guarantee of "perfect happiness" in the future for a real George Knightley and Emma Woodhouse, and that the reader should know enough of real life not to believe it either.

As mentioned previously, Emma opens with Emma and Mr. Woodhouse thinking about the marriage of Miss Taylor and Mr. Weston. Most of their thoughts are negative. For both of them, this negative response is not so much to the institution of marriage as it is to the changes which follow marriage. To Mr. Woodhouse, matrimony, as the origin of change, is always disagreeable, since he is alarmed by any kind of change (7). Emma, although she is able to recognize the "promise of happiness for her friend" (6), regrets that the marriage will deprive her of Miss Taylor's companionship.

But Emma does not tell her father of her regrets. Instead, she tries to cheer them both up by enumerating good things about the marriage. She reminds her father that the Weston's will be living near to them and that Mr. Weston is a fine man. When Mr. Knightley joins them, he reinforces these more positive thoughts. He reminds them, "The marriage is to Miss Taylor's advantage; [Emma] knows how very acceptable it must be at Miss Taylor's time of life to be settled in a home of her own, and how important to her to be secure in a comfortable provision" (11). Thus, early in the novel, the economic importance of marriage for a woman is emphasized. This was, as W. A. Craik has pointed out, a time when there were "no social services, no insurance schemes, no national medical care, no pension schemes for sickness or old age" (94). A woman, especially a woman with

no income or property of her own, which must have been the case with the former governess, had to rely on her husband to provide economic security for her old age.

The position of Miss Taylor is contrasted with that of Mr. Weston. While it is vital for Miss Taylor to marry someone who can contribute to her financial security, the narrator, presumably relating Emma's thinking, asserts that Mr. Weston does not need to make such a consideration. He is fortunate enough to have succeeded to "a small independence" early in life (15). Although his first marriage (to Miss Churchill, a young woman with a fortune of her own) left Mr. Weston "rather a poorer man than at first," in the years following his first wife's death he has "realized an easy competence" and therefore he can marry a woman "as portionless even as Miss Taylor" (16).

Although Mr. Weston does not need to consider the financial position of the woman he decides to marry, Emma is aware of the fact that not all men have such fortunate financial situations. The situations of Mr. Elton and Robert Martin are more the norm. Emma eventually understands that Mr. Elton is typical of the many young men who need to use their assets to increase their economic positions. Mr. Knightley, who always perceives him correctly, describes Mr. Elton's intentions accurately when he tells Emma that Mr. Elton "knows the value of a good income as well as anybody" (66); Mr. Knightley predicts that

Mr. Elton will not "throw himself away" on a woman with a small dowry (66). Emma slowly realizes that Mr. Knightley is correct, that Mr. Elton wants to marry her "to aggrandize and enrich himself" (135), and that after she, an heiress of thirty thousand pounds, rejects his proposal, he will look for "Miss Somebody else with twenty, or with ten" (135). Mr. Elton does exactly that; after Emma rejects his proposal, he goes to Bath. When he returns to Highbury he has secured an engagement to Miss Augusta Hawkins, a young woman "in possession of an independent fortune, of so many thousands as would always be called ten" (181). His wife's fortune improves his financial position as well as his social status.

Robert Martin's situation is seen by Emma as being different from that of either Mr. Weston or Mr. Elton. Mr. Weston's financial security was the result of an inheritance; Mr. Elton's came from his wife's dowry and social connections. Robert Martin, a farmer and, therefore, of a lower social class, needs to consider how much dowry his wife might bring even more than Mr. Elton does--or so Emma believes. When she is trying to discourage Harriet's interest in Robert Martin, Emma suggests that, at the age of 24, he is too young to be thinking of marrying. Emma suggests that it will be another six years before he will be financially secure enough to marry. Then, if he should meet a suitable young woman, it might be possible for him to



think of marrying, for "that is as early as most men can afford to marry, who are not born to an independence" (30). Emma's representation of Robert Martin's position is later revealed to be inaccurate, since Mr. Knightley assures Emma that Martin proved to him that he could afford to marry Harriet; however, Emma's facts about the usual situation for most young men of Robert Martin's age and class are, as we shall see, probably accurate.

The financial position of a possible marriage partner is usually closely correlated with the person's social status. Emma's friendship with Harriet Smith makes her realize the importance of the social rank of both parties in the marriage. Harriet is "the natural daughter of somebody" (22), which means that her social status, which depends primarily on the class of her unknown father, is difficult to determine. Emma wishes to think Harriet's father was a gentleman so that Harriet is entitled to command a social position similar to Emma's own. Because she wants Harriet firmly established in her own class by marriage, Emma discourages Harriet's interest in Robert Martin and encourages her to consider Mr. Elton. In Emma's thinking: "Mr. Elton's situation was most suitable, quite the gentleman himself, and without low connections; and at the same time not of any family that could fairly object to the doubtful birth of Harriet" (35).

Emma believes that her patronage, the possibility that

Harriet's father is a gentleman, and Harriet's own looks and personality will be sufficient to secure for Harriet a "good" marriage, a marriage with a man of the gentry class. Emma's conclusion, which might seem to result from her snobbishness and her exaggerated faith in her own powers, is not justified; however, her assumption about the importance of social class is not condemned by Mr. Knightley who, although he has different ideas from Emma's as to whom Harriet should marry, is in agreement with Emma on the importance of the social status of the possible marriage partner. Mr. Knightley suggests to Emma that it will not be easy for Harriet to marry a gentleman because he considers Harriet to have few claims "either of birth, nature, or education" (61). He says, "Men of family would not be very fond of connecting themselves with a girl of such obscurity--and most prudent men would be afraid of the inconvenience and disgrace they might be involved in, when the mystery of her parentage came to be revealed" (64).

Mr. Knightley further supports Emma's concern with social class by his position endorsing a marriage between Harriet Smith and Robert Martin. Since Mr. Knightley does not believe Emma is correct in supposing Harriet's father to be a gentleman, he approves of Robert Martin's proposal to Harriet. Mr. Knightley tells Emma, "The advantage of the match I felt to be all on her side and had not the smallest doubt (nor have I now) that there would be a general cry-out

upon her extreme good luck" (61). He feels that Robert Martin is superior to Harriet in social class as well as character.

Thus, although he does show an awareness of the importance of social status, Mr. Knightley's position demonstrates that Emma's views may indeed be limited by her snobbishness. Mr. Knightley, in his endorsement of Robert Martin's proposal to Harriet, considers more than just status. He also appraises the two individuals involved. When Emma suggests that it would be degrading for Harriet to marry Robert Martin, Mr. Knightley replies that he does not see how it can be degrading for "illegitimacy and ignorance to be married to a respectable, intelligent gentleman farmer" (62), significantly labeling him with a term emphasizing the positive qualities that Mr. Knightley thinks Robert Martin shares with the gentry. He says, "Robert Martin's manners have sense, sincerity, and good humour to recommend them; and his mind has more true gentility than Harriet Smith could understand" (65). Mr. Knightley is aware of class distinctions but his description of Robert Martin suggests that for him character is more important than social class.

Although she may consider the issues of economics and status to be more important than Mr. Knightley sees them, Emma does also evaluate the man's character and personality. Emma encourages Harriet to consider Mr. Elton because he is

"good humoured, cheerful, obliging, and gentle" (34). Emma thinks Mr. Elton would be a good husband for Harriet because he is good-humoured, well-meaning, respectable, and "without any deficiency of useful understanding or knowledge of the world" (35). He is also "really a very pleasing young man," who is "reckoned very handsome, his person much admired in general" (35). While this evaluation of Mr. Elton is inaccurate because at the time it was made Emma was seeing in him many of the characteristics she wants to believe are there, it does point up traits which Emma has good reason to think any husband ought to have. The obliging and gentle qualities she wants to think Mr. Elton has are qualities which she values in her father. Good humor is a quality which she finds lacking in her valetudinarian father, "a nervous man, easily depressed" (7), and in John Knightley, her brother-in-law. Although she always seems to treat her father with kindness and patience, Emma must find Mr. Woodhouse's temperament very trying at times. There are also many occasions when she becomes annoyed with her brother-in-law because he is "capable of being sometimes out of humour" (92); in Emma's opinion, though he is "not an ill-tempered man, not so often cross as to deserve such a reproach . . . his temper was not his great perfection" (92). Therefore, it is not surprising that Emma suggests to her father that Mr. Weston deserves a good wife because "he is such a good-humoured, pleasant, excellent man" (8).

Emma's standard, although she is unaware of it for most of the novel, is the man destined to be her husband, Mr. George Knightley. As his name suggests, Mr. Knightley is the ideal mate for the story's heroine, embodying those traits which Emma (and Jane Austen) feel the ideal husband ought to have. Mr. Knightley does not have the "reserved manners" which prevent his brother from being generally pleasing; he clearly enjoys the social contact which he maintains with those in and around Highbury. He continually brings into the daily life of Highbury "the spirit of chivalry" (Duckworth 156). Unlike Mr. Elton, he is almost always "kind, tolerant, generous, dignified, resolute, right in judgment, and clear about motives" (Bennett 250). Emma is clearly comparing Frank Churchill to Mr. Knightley when she decides that Frank lacks "that upright integrity, that strict adherence to truth and principle, that disdain of tricks and littleness which a man should display in every transaction of his life" (397). Where Frank Churchill displays an "indifference to a confusion of rank" (198), Mr. Knightley maintains a better balance. Although he does not completely disregard social rank, Mr. Knightley is concerned with intrinsic human worth; he is more interested in the person than the position. Because of his jealousy of Frank Churchill, Mr. Knightley is not quite a paragon of reason and virtue, but, as James Bennett suggests, "he comes close" (250).

The two characteristics which both Emma and Mr. Knightley seem to find desirable in either sex are openness and elegance. Openness is a quality ascribed to Mr. Weston and Robert Martin. Mr. Knightley approves of Robert Martin because Martin "always speaks to the purpose; open, straight forward, and very well judging" (59). It is a quality which Mr. Elton, Frank Churchill, and the dour John Knightley lack. When Emma censures Frank for his lack of integrity, his failure to adhere to truth and principle, and his pleasure in deception, she is criticizing his lack of openness. Both Emma and Mr. Knightley also note the lack of this quality in Jane Fairfax. Mr. Knightley comments that Jane "has not the open temper which a man would wish for in a wife" (288). Mr. Knightley prefers Emma's candor and frankness, just as she prefers his "disdain of tricks."

Both also consider elegance a very important trait. To Austen, "elegance" referred to more than the modern sense of the word as the superficial appearance of a person or object. When Austen used the term she was probably also referring to an outlook and cast of mind, a quality we might describe as sensitivity to others and to one's proper place in the order of society. Elegance cannot be attained by the simple-minded Harriet Smith. Mrs. Elton can achieve only a facade of true elegance. Emma's first impression of Mrs. Elton--a judgment which proves to be correct--is that "her person was rather good; her face not unpretty; but neither

feature, nor air, nor voice, nor manner, were elegant" (270). Mr. Elton and Frank Churchill also lack elegance. Frank's lack is shown, for example, when the party at the Crown is being planned. At this time Emma decides that Frank's "indifference to a confusion of rank, bordered too much on inelegance of mind" (198). For these reasons, Joseph Wiesenfarth suggests that until late in the novel, true elegance is found only in Mr. Knightley, in his "keen judgment of character, genuine English amiability, and straightforward humane action" ("Emma: Point Counter Point" 210). Although Emma initially judges Jane Fairfax "very elegant, remarkably elegant" (167) and clearly also sees herself as elegant, Wiesenfarth suggests that both Emma and Jane gain true elegance only after they overcome the mistakes they make with respect to their courtships and are able to gain a wider perspective on their proper roles in society (210).

The physical appearance of the young man seems to be low on the list of things to be considered. Emma was initially impressed with Mr. Elton's appearance, and although he did not quite measure up to her standard for herself--"there being a want of elegance of feature which she could not dispense with" (35)--she felt that Harriet would be satisfied. Frank Churchill's appearance also impresses Emma. When they first meet, she thinks him a "very good looking young man," whose height, air, and

address were all unexceptionable (190). Emma eventually decides that both Mr. Elton and Frank Churchill lack elements of character which she considers important and that good looks are not sufficient to make up for their deficiencies. Significantly, little is said about Mr. Knightley's appearance; it is his character which is portrayed. Emma eventually realizes that how the man looks is secondary to what he is.

Just as Emma is at first uncertain of how important physical appearance ought to be, so she is long ambivalent as to the role love ought to play. Love is mentioned in several of the relationships. For example, when she is trying to arrange a match between Mr. Elton and Harriet Smith, Emma deludedly perceives Mr. Elton as "being in the fairest way of falling in love" with Harriet (42) and acting in a manner which "had a vast deal of the lover" in it (43). Mr. Knightley says that Robert Martin is "desperately in love [with Harriet] and means to marry her" (59). Of the relationship between John and Isabella Knightley, Mr. Knightley says, "John loves Isabella with a reasonable and therefore not a blind affection" (40). Mr. Knightley observes to Mrs. Weston: "[Emma] always declares she will never marry, which, of course, means just nothing at all. But I have no idea that she has yet ever seen a man she cared for. It would not be a bad thing for her to be very much in love with a proper object" (41). Emma makes a



similar observation when she tells Harriet that she does not plan to marry. Emma says: "Were I to fall in love, indeed it would be a different thing! but I have never been in love; it is not my way, or my nature; and I do not think I ever shall, and without love I am sure I should be a fool to change such a situation as mine" (84).

Although they recognize the existence of romantic love, Emma and Mr. Knightley disagree as to how important it is in marriage. For example, when she is laboring under romantic delusions, Emma believes that Mr. Elton may decide to marry Harriet, in spite of Harriet's lack of wealth and position. Mr. Knightley, however, speaking with the voice of reason rather than of emotion, warns Emma that though Mr. Elton "may talk sentimentally . . . he will act rationally," and that he is "not at all likely to make an imprudent match" (66). Emma's response is to maintain that Mr. Knightley does not "make due allowance for the influence of a strong passion at war with all interested motives" (67). Thus they are both sure that love may play a part, but they are not in agreement as to how significant that part is.

While they may recognize its existence, both Emma and Mr. Knightley seem to distrust romantic love. They believe that romantic love can cause a person to ignore rank and income when choosing a spouse, that it has the power to move an individual to actions and behavior which contradict the person's reason and might even be contrary to that person's

best interests. The secret engagement of Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill is typical of what happens when one is overcome by love. Emma and Mr. Knightley believe that Jane's love for Frank causes her to go against her better judgment and consent to a secret engagement, a decision which even Jane herself later regrets.

Emma is definitely distrustful of other effects of being in love as well. She seems to believe that a person in love feels "confusion, bewilderment, fatigue, tension and hardship" (Barbara Hardy 51). When Emma examines her feelings about Frank Churchill she decides: "This sensation of listlessness, weariness, stupidity, this disinclination to sit down and employ myself, this feeling of everything's being dull and insipid about the house!--I must be in love" (262). However, upon more self-examination, "it struck her that she could not be very much in love" because "a strong attachment certainly must produce more of a struggle than she could foresee in her own feelings" (264). She concludes: "He is not really necessary to my happiness. So much the better. I certainly will not persuade myself to feel more than I do. I am quite enough in love. I should be sorry to be more" (264-65). Emma is, in fact, relieved to find that she is not more emotionally involved. She thinks: "I shall do very well again after a little while--and then, it will be a good thing over; for they say everybody is in love once in their lives, and I shall have been let off easily" (265).

Emma seems only to want to enjoy the emotion for a little while and then to return to the security of a more rational life, a life controlled more by reason and less by emotion.

Emma (in the description Jane Austen explicitly gives the reader) does not seem to feel passion for Mr. Knightley--at least not the violent emotion modern readers might expect her to feel for her beloved. It may be that Emma would have felt such emotions, but, as Fay Weldon suggests, Jane Austen, writing in accordance with the conventions of her time, simply did not describe them (25). The author does, however, manage to imply that there is deep feeling between Emma and Mr. Knightley. Juliet McMaster, in Jane Austen on Love, says that in all of Austen's novels, "the sexual aspect of courtship is suggested rather than described" (67); nevertheless, there is ample evidence of the pleasure in proximity and contact which the heroines enjoy with the men they love (71). In Emma, as John Hardy points out, "One cannot miss the genuine feeling that flows through so many of Emma's exchanges with Knightley" (105).

All of this suggests that Emma, although she has some ideas about the qualities desirable in a husband, is not sure which are most important. She recognizes that most women need to marry for economic security, but she also realizes that marrying for money does not guarantee happiness in the marriage. Emma would prefer to have the couple marry because they are in love, but she knows that

love doesn't pay the bills and enable the couple to live in those conditions which are necessary for physical comfort. She would like for the woman to be married to a man with a pleasing appearance, but in the end, a compatible mate with a strong character seems more desirable. Emma is fortunate in that she herself does not have to make any choices; Mr. Knightley unites all the criteria--he is financially well-situated, and has a pleasing appearance, a compatible personality, and a strong character. In addition, he and Emma love one another.

Most of the considerations of marriage and marriage partners discussed in Emma are also discussed in Jane Austen's letters. Especially significant in their communication of Austen's ideas on marriage are five letters which Austen wrote to her niece Fanny Knight in November of 1814 and in February and March of 1817. Since Mansfield Park was published in 1814 and Emma, her next book, in 1816, the letters would have been written at about the time that Austen was writing Emma. There is much similarity between Austen's advice to Fanny and Emma's advice to Harriet. Thus the letters support the theory that the opinions expressed

by Emma closely parallel Jane Austen's own carefully considered opinions at that time.

Although Jane Austen never married, her letters do not suggest that Austen thought it likely that her niece would also remain single or that she would recommend such a course to Fanny. Austen seems to accept marriage as inevitable at some point in Fanny's future, but like Emma, she regrets the changes which will result from it. In her February 20, 1817, letter to Fanny, Austen writes, "Oh! what a loss it will be when you are married. You are too agreeable in your single state, too agreeable as a niece. I shall hate you when your delicious play of mind is all settled down into conjugal and maternal affections." A few lines later she writes: "I only do not like you should marry anybody. And yet I do wish you to marry very much, because I know you will never be happy till you are; but the loss of a Fanny Knight will be never made up to me; My 'affec: Niece F. C. Wildman' will be but a poor substitute" (Letters, February 20, 1817).

Austen's assumption that Fanny would some day marry was realistic and proved to be accurate. At that time few young women chose to remain single, for "in spite of shining examples of single life in every station, the unmarried woman, or old maid, was looked down upon with mixed pity and contempt" (Merryn Williams 4). The woman who did not marry was regarded as a failure and usually had to contend with a

general societal lack of respect. One indication of this prejudice was the custom of giving married women precedence over the unmarried. We are reminded of this in Emma when Mr. Woodhouse reminds Emma, "A bride . . . is always the first in company, let others be who they may" (280).

Jane Austen was well aware of what life was like for most unmarried women. In her March 18, 1817, letter to Fanny, Austen wrote, "Single women have a dreadful propensity for being poor--which is one very strong argument in favour of Matrimony." Austen's portrayal of Miss Bates in Emma suggests the kind of life a typical old maid might lead. Miss Bates

enjoyed a most uncommon degree of popularity for a woman neither young, handsome, rich, nor married. [She] stood in the very worst predicament in the world for having much of the public favour; and she had no intellectual superiority to make atonement to herself, or to frighten those who might hate her, into outward respect. She had never boasted either beauty or cleverness. Her youth had passed without distinction, and her middle life was devoted to the care of a failing mother, and the endeavour to make a small income go as far as possible. (21)

The life of a single woman such as Miss Bates does not sound very appealing.

Jane Austen would have been well aware that while a young man had several options for earning a living, a young woman of this social class had only two--she could write novels or she could become a teacher, either in a school or in the role of governess. In Emma, Miss Bates' niece, Jane Fairfax, is typical of the genteel young woman with an education, but no family and no financial support. Jane appears to have no alternative, after she decides not to marry Frank Churchill, except to become a governess, fate which she herself compares to slavery. Margaret Kirkham believes that in her portrayal of Jane's situation, "Jane Austen shows most clearly her feminist convictions, for the low status of governesses and the humiliations they endured were among the injustices which moved intelligent women most throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries" (132). Neither the portrayal of Miss Bates nor that of Jane Fairfax suggests that the life of a single woman was very desirable.

However, Emma believes that her situation is very different from that of Miss Bates or Jane Fairfax. She tells Harriet, "Fortune I do not want; employment I do not want; consequence I do not want" (84); therefore, since she has "none of the usual inducements of women to marry," Emma says she intends to remain single. She tells Harriet:

I shall not be a poor old maid; and it is poverty only which makes celibacy contemptible to a generous public! A single woman, with a very

narrow income, must be a ridiculous, disagreeable, old maid! the proper sport of boys and girls; but a single woman, of good fortune, is always respectable, and may be as sensible and pleasant as anybody else. And the distinction is not quite so much against the candour and common sense of the world as appears at first; for a very narrow income has a tendency to contract the mind, and sour the temper. Those who can barely live, and who live perforce in a very small, and generally very inferior, society, may well be illiberal and cross. (85)

Austen's correlation between poverty and a single woman's status was probably based on personal experience as well as observations. Although her own household--Austen, her sister Cassandra, their mother, and Martha Lloyd, a cousin--had an adequate income after the death of Austen's father, they did not have many luxuries. Austen had very little money of her own until she gained a small income from her novels during the last years of her life.

In his Life of Jane Austen, John Halperin suggests that by the time Austen was writing Emma, the money which she had earned from her earlier books made her feel that she deserved to be treated as "a woman of consequence" (272). This would have contributed even more to Austen's awareness of the position of single women in society. Halperin feels



that Austen's satiric handling of the question of precedence at the Weston's party at the Crown is "Jane Austen's declaration of independence" (Life of Jane Austen 272). He believes that Austen is expressing her own frustration with her own status in this scene and that there is much irony in the fact that Mrs. Elton, for whom precedence is terribly important, is vulgar and insipid, while Emma, because she is an unmarried woman, must come after Mrs. Elton, even though Emma is intelligent and cultured. By 1817 Jane Austen must have been well aware of the social and economic frustrations of single women.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Jane Austen never encouraged her niece to remain single. On the other hand, Austen does not encourage Fanny to marry solely to avoid the economic hardships of being single. In a letter which she wrote to Fanny on November 18, 1814, Austen gave her niece this advice: "[I] entreat you not to commit yourself farther, & not to think of accepting him unless you really do like him. Anything is to be preferred or endured rather than marrying without Affection." In another work, The Watsons, Jane Austen has a young woman, Emma Watson, express an opinion which seems to be Austen's own when she says:

To be so bent on marriage--to pursue a man merely for the sake of situation--is a sort of thing that shocks me; I cannot understand it. Poverty is a great evil, but to a woman of education and

feeling it ought not, it cannot be the greatest--I would rather be a teacher at a school (and I can think of nothing worse) than marry a man I do not like. (318)

Austen was well aware of the importance of an adequate income. One of the reasons she cannot encourage Fanny to think more seriously of marriage to "Mr. J. P." in 1814 is "such uncertainty as there is of when [an engagement] may be completed.--Years may pass, before he is Independent" (Letters, November 30, 1814). Then, as now, the young man's financial situation was often closely related to his age and social status. Lawrence Stone, in his study of families of England between 1500 and 1800, cites figures which indicate that the median age for marriage among small property-owners of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was 26 to 30 for men and 24 to 27 for women. This delay was necessary because a lengthy period of saving, or the death or retirement of the man's parents, was usually required before a couple could marry and set up their own house. Therefore, when Emma pointed out to Harriet that Robert Martin would probably not be in a financial position to marry until he was six years older than his present 24 years of age, and that when he did marry, marriage to a young woman with some money would still be desirable, Emma was reflecting an economic reality in Austen's time.

For a woman who married wisely, marriage meant

financial security. It also gave her the satisfaction of having an "establishment" of her own, a most desirable asset, as Emma reminds her father when she says, "You would not have had Miss Taylor live with us forever . . . when she might have a house of her own" (8). In her February 20, 1817, letter to Fanny, a letter in which Austen discusses the pros and cons of Fanny's marrying a young suitor, Mr. J. Wildman, Austen comments: "I like Chilham Castle for you." In an earlier letter, Austen discusses the behavior of another niece, Anna, who had married Ben Lefroy in November of 1814. She tells Fanny:

We have heard nothing from Anna. I trust she is very comfortable in her new home. Her Letters have been very sensible & satisfactory with parade of happiness, which I like them the better for.--I have often known young married Women write in a way I did not like, in that respect. (Letters, November 18, 1814)

While Austen might acknowledge that financial security and a home of one's own were important, she could not accept the idea that they were more important than other considerations. Perhaps her clearest portrayal of this in her novels is her treatment of Charlotte Lucas in Pride and Prejudice. Charlotte accepted the proposal of Mr. Collins "solely from the pure and disinterested desire of an establishment" (122). Although Charlotte seems "tolerably

happy" at Hunsford when Elizabeth Bennet visits her several months after Charlotte's marriage (Strimpel 275), Elizabeth's attitude toward the marriage and Charlotte's situation remains one of censure.

Austen was aware that it was not only young women who married for economic security and a comfortable establishment. In her November 21, 1808, letter to her sister Cassandra, Austen wrote:

[Y]ou will have heard that Miss Sawbridge is married. . . . Mr. Maxwell was tutor to the young Gregorys--consequently they must be one of the happiest couples in the World, & either of them worthy of Envy--for she must be excessively in love, and he mounts from nothing to a comfortable Home.

Perhaps Jane Austen's reluctance to endorse marriage merely for the sake of being married was the result of her awareness of what a woman gave up when she married. Austen knew that when a woman married, she gave up all control of her life. In Emma, we see this in Emma's initial rejection of the idea of marriage for herself because of her awareness of the changes marriage could mean in her own position. Since neither Mr. Woodhouse nor Miss Taylor has exercised any control over Emma for several years, Emma has been "practically the absolute monarch of her condition" (Scott 63). Emma is well aware that "her position as mistress

affords her a degree of social power and independence which will be denied in even the best marriage" (Siefert 77). Jane Austen, who had several married brothers, was fully aware of the control a husband had over his wife's life, a control which extended to all aspects of her life. During Jane Austen's lifetime, an unmarried woman had more legal rights than a married woman. An unmarried woman had a right to her own earnings and property and was a reasonably free agent (O'Malley 24). A married woman "could neither own property nor make a will, and any goods she possessed belonged to her husband" (O'Malley 24). After marriage the very being or legal existence of a woman was suspended, or at least incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband (O'Malley 22). Once married, there was virtually no chance of escape from the marriage for the woman.

Marriage with a harsh and selfish man might be hell. The law did nothing to alleviate it or to countenance the wife's escape. There was no possibility of divorce for a virtuous woman, the expensive procedure of divorce by act of parliament being in practice only open to injured husbands. (O'Malley 24)

From the day of her marriage onward the wife's body was bound to be at the service of her husband for his pleasure and for the begetting of children. For the woman this meant frequent pregnancy. Jane Austen, who had close ties to a

large family, was well aware of what married women's lives frequently involved regarding childbearing. In her March 13, 1817, letter to Fanny, Austen reminds Fanny that "by not beginning the business of Mothering quite so early in life, you will be young in Constitution, spirits, figure & countenance, while Mrs. Wm. Hammond is growing old by confinements & nursing." In her March 23, 1817, letter to Fanny she comments on another niece:

Anna has not a chance of escape; her husband called here the other day, and said she was pretty well but not equal to so long a walk; she must come in her Donkey Carriage. Poor Animal, she will be worn out before she is thirty.--I am very sorry for her.

Statistical evidence suggests what a typical woman of the time could expect: as many as fifty percent of all the babies would die before they were two; one baby in every four would be stillborn; the woman's chances of dying in childbirth were not negligible and increased with every pregnancy; after fifteen pregnancies (which meant something like eight babies brought to term and safely delivered), the woman's chances of dying were one in two (Weldon 30).

In the case of Fanny's possible marriage to "Mr. J. P.," Austen admits that that the young man would possibly have made a good husband. Austen lists his assets:

His situation in life, family, friends, and his

character--his uncommonly amiable mind, strict principles, just notions, good habits--all that you know so well how to value, all that really is of the first importance--everything of this nature pleads his cause most strongly. (Letters, Novemeber 18, 1814)

However, although Austen values such a fine young man, these assets do not automatically engender a recommendation that Fanny marry him. Fanny is advised "not to think of accepting him unless you really do like him. Anything is to be preferred or endured rather than marrying without affection" (Letters, November 18, 1814).

A short time later Austen writes Fanny:

[You] must not let anything depend on my opinion. Your own feelings and none but your own, should determine such an important point. . . . I am perfectly convinced that your present feelings supposing you were to marry now, would be sufficient for his happiness;--but when I think how very, very far it is from a Now, and take everything that may be, into consideration, I dare not say, "Determine to accept him." The risk is too great for you, unless your own Sentiments prompt it.--You may think me perverse perhaps; in my last letter I was urging everything in his favor, & now I am inclining the other way; but I

cannot help it; I am at present more impressed with the possible Evil that may arise to you from engaging yourself to him--in word or mind--than with anything else.--When I consider how few young Men you have yet seen much of--how capable you are (yes, I do still think you very capable) of being really in love--and how full of temptation the next 6 or 7 years of your Life will probably be-- (it is the very period of Life for the strongest attachments to be formed)--I cannot wish you with your present very cool feelings to devote yourself in honour to him. (Letters, November 30, 1814)

Austen's advice to her niece sounds very similar to the advice Emma gives Harriet when Harriet is considering Robert Martin's first proposal. Emma advises Harriet:

If a woman doubts as to whether she should accept a man or not, she certainly ought to refuse him. If she can hesitate as to "Yes" she ought to say "No" directly. It is not a state to be safely entered into with doubtful feelings, with half a heart. (52)

Emma believes, "A woman is not to marry a man merely because she is asked, or because he is attached to her" (54).

Jane Austen may recognize the advantage of marriage, and of Fanny's marriage to "Mr. J. P.," but in the end she



does not endorse it because she does not think Fanny feels strongly enough for the young man. "It seems as if your being secure of him (as you say yourself) had made you Indifferent," even though, "he is, just what he ever was, only more evidently & uniformly devoted to you" (Letters, November 18, 1814). Jane Austen recognized the importance of love on both sides. After assessing Fanny's behavior and feelings, Austen assures her niece, "You cannot be in love." Austen tells Fanny that earlier, when they had discussed the situation, "I did consider you as being attached in a degree," but "not so much in love as you thought yourself." Austen says that at that time she had considered Fanny's attachment to be "quite sufficient for happiness, as I had no doubt it would increase with opportunity" (Letters, November 18, 1814). She advises Fanny not to marry the young man because "nothing can be compared to the misery of being bound without Love, bound to one, and preferring another" (Letters, November 30, 1814).

Two years later, she writes to her niece about another suitor, "By your decription he cannot be in love with you, however he may try at it, & I could not wish the match unless there were a great deal of Love on his side" (Letters, March 13, 1817). She advises her niece:

Do not be in a hurry; depend upon it, the right Man will come at last; you will in the course of the next two or three years, meet with somebody

more generally unexceptionable than anyone you have yet known, who will love you as warmly as ever He did, and who will so completely attach you, that you never really loved before.

(Letters, March 13, 1817)

Although she considered love of the mate to be important, Austen could not wholly endorse marriage either for love alone or if the couple was not "in love." Austen's attitude is typical of her time, a time when "almost everyone agreed . . . that both physical desire and romantic love were unsafe bases for an enduring marriage, since both were violent mental disturbances which would inevitably be of short duration" (Stone 272). Jane Austen's conflict between marrying for love or marriage for financial and social security may be due to changes in attitudes toward marriage and the family which were taking place during her lifetime. According to Stone's research, Austen grew up during the last years of a period that saw "greater stress on internal bonding" and a "marked reversal of the previous trend toward domestic patriarchy," particularly among the gentry and bourgeoisie (655). Since a patriarchy sees the forces of love and power as antithetical, true heterosexual love is seen as subversive because it involves freedom of choice. The patriarchal system sees love as a means of gaining power over someone or falling under someone's power (Smith 14). Toward the end of the eighteenth century, the

patriarchy began to lose power, and "a new recognition of the need for personal autonomy, and a new respect for the individual pursuit of happiness" began to emerge (Stone 273). This resulted in a shift toward mate selection based more on free choice than on parental decision and "as much on expectations of lasting mutual affection as on calculations of an increase in money, status, or power" (656). The resulting new family type carried "a much greater load of emotional and sexual commitment"; it was "more conjugal and less kin and community oriented, . . . less patriarchal and authoritarian" than the one it succeeded (657).

Thus, in Austen's time, even though the parents among the higher social levels were still somewhat active operators in the marriage market, the daughters had gained a greater degree of freedom in their choice of a mate. The young woman was likely, however, to feel the conflict between two different sets of values. As Selma James points out, the society was beginning to accept, even promote, romantic love. As a result, a young woman was encouraged not to be materialistic, but to marry the man she loved even if it meant that she would be a pauper. But, on the other hand, many a young woman knew that if she followed this advice and married a man she loved who had little money, her family might suffer, and her first obligation was, after all, to her family. Such a young woman would feel that

there could be "no morality based on the selfish consideration of [her] own feelings to the exclusion of their effect on others" (36).

In Summary, Jane Austen believed that love was a necessary but not a sufficient condition for marriage (Lerner 27). Although she knew that some people need to marry in order to survive, Austen was critical of marriages entered into merely for economic security. Austen realized that married women often led unenviable lives and they gave up a great deal of personal freedom, especially if their husbands were tyrants or if they experienced frequent pregnancies. In Emma, Austen gives us a heroine who is financially secure without marriage and who has a position of honor and power in her father's house. She may love Mr. Knightley, but even if they don't marry, they seem likely to continue the close relationship they have had for several years. So why does Jane Austen have Emma marry Mr. Knightley?

Since there is little evidence that Jane Austen endorsed marriage as "the woman's sacrosanct destiny" (Brown, "Jane Austen and the Feminist Tradition" 337), it

seems necessary to examine the function of the marriage in the context of the novel in order to try to find a satisfactory answer to the question just posed. One possible explanation of why Austen has Emma marry Mr. Knightley is simply that the comic form Austen uses requires the marriage. The formula of comedy requires that by the end of the comedy, the comedy of errors be played out, all the mistakes in identity be corrected, and each person be placed in his or her proper role. At the end of a comedy each person is accorded the measure of happiness it is his or her nature to enjoy. The heroine is expected to gain the love of a good man, the security of a desirable marriage, and the recognition of personal worth which she deserves. Therefore, since Mr. Knightley and Emma are "the characters who most deserve to enjoy and are best able to appreciate one another's qualities, qualities which include their differences," their marriage is what is required by the comic genre (Kissane 182).

This explanation, however, is satisfying only if one finds the matter of form to be the primary factor in deciding how the story should end. If one gives attention to Austen's concern with realism as well as her attention to form, the formal order is much less satisfying. Since, as Mathilde Strimpel points out, "it is in the nature of comedy to mete out punishment less than commensurate with the crime" (290), the comic ending does not satisfy the demands

of those who believe that the ending ought to be a closer reflection of "reality." Therefore, it is not surprising that some readers are dissatisfied with the marriage of Emma and Mr. Knightley. At least three critics, P. J. M. Scott, Julia Brown, and Marvin Mudrick, believe that Emma receives a better reward than she deserves. Scott believes that Emma should "suffer larger and less fleeting penalties for her generally delinquent attitudes" (68). He believes: "'The perfect marriage' comes as yet another glittering prize in a continuous career of self-absorption, destructive attitudes and acts" (70), and that the ending is softened and all comes out well, "so that Emma will not seem guilty of being the really ruinous creature she is" (72). "Not only does the heroine achieve wishes beyond her deserts," Scott writes, "we are asked to believe that she knows how to enjoy them aright, the first seven-eighths of the book having shown just the reverse" (71). Brown also feels that Emma is not punished sufficiently for her misconduct and that Emma's inner nature never alters. She says, "Protean, elusive, capable of true goodness and deliberate cruelty, she is what she is--a reservoir of indeterminacy" (106). Brown believes that at the end of the novel: "Emma is still Emma, and Mr. Knightley is still Mr. Knightley. . . . The only real difference is the knowledge of love between them, and the willingness to be influenced by that other that, as always, is central to Jane Austen's conception of love" (109).

Unlike Brown, Mudrick will accept the idea that Emma has undergone some changes, but he suggests that the changes are only temporary. He believes that Emma has acknowledged defeat and is now "willing to be dominated by a man of whom her intelligence and her snobbery can approve" (200); he attributes this, however, to the fact that Emma's flood of repentance has not yet subsided (200). Because he sees no sign that Emma's motives have changed, that there is any difference in her except her relief and temporary awareness, Mudrick expects Emma to revert to her former ways (200). He says: "It is hard to think of Emma undominant for any length of time" (200).

I believe that these critics are putting too much emphasis on the novel's realistic elements and showing too little regard for its theme. They are so concerned that the happy ending should conform precisely to the merits and demerits of the characters that they undervalue Austen's depiction of the maturation of Emma. They are disregarding what Emma experiences and what she learns as she gains maturity. Joseph Duffy succinctly describes the theme of the novel as "Emma's passage from innocence to experience--from dreams to consciousness" (40); the novel depicts, in Duffy's words, "the awakening of a normal, intelligent young woman to the possibilities of physical love and the direction, often chaotic, taken by her curiosity in an effort at discovering that love" (40).

Emma's initial difficulties stem from her lack of involvement with reality, her disengagement from life. Emma must discover who and what she is; she receives an education in judgment, in right awareness, and in emotions (Bradbury 61). The appropriateness of her marriage to Mr. Knightley should, therefore, be examined in relationship to Emma's changing attitude toward marriage as she matures and learns about love; it is not simply a part of the comic formula.

At the beginning of the novel, Emma is ignoring her physical maturity and increasing sexual needs. Emma's initial rejection of the idea of marriage for herself is based on an awareness that marriage would mean the loss of her personal freedom. Emma, who enjoys her position of power as mistress of her father's home, realizes that marriage would mean submitting to the authority of a husband, and Emma is "much more attracted to her self-indulgent spinsterhood" (Butler 252). As James Boyd White explains: "She has engaged her powerful feelings and imagination in trying to maintain a child's paradise, a timeless world in which she is a princess beyond compare" (172).

Emma's initial interest in finding a husband for Harriet is, in reality, an attempt to gain romantic experiences by proxy. Emma is seeking a vicarious relationship through Harriet; therefore, the men Emma considers as possible husbands for Harriet must also be



possible husbands for Emma herself. Emma discourages Harriet's interest in Robert Martin because such an involvement would be contrary to Emma's interests--if Harriet were to accept Robert Martin's proposal, Harriet would not have relationships with other young men for Emma to experience vicariously. Alex Page suggests that from a psychological perspective such behavior on Emma's part is not abnormal for "a young woman on the threshold of physical love," who is both terrified by, and attracted to, sex (571). He believes that it is usual for a girl in such an "androgynous state" to want "to stay outside but close up (in that order) to satisfy her curiosity, to learn, and to be ready when Mr. Right is discovered" (563).

Harriet allows herself to be persuaded to reject Robert Martin's proposal, because she is willing to accept Emma's conviction that Mr. Elton would be a suitable husband for her and that he has fallen in love with her. Both Emma and Harriet are hurt when Mr. Elton reveals that he was interested in Emma, not Harriet. Harriet is heartbroken for a time and Emma is sorry that she caused her friend such misery. Emma is forced to conclude that she has made a mistake, that she should not have tried to foster a match between Harriet and Mr. Elton, but she will not give up the idea of finding a husband for Harriet. The relationship of Harriet and Mr. Elton, even though it does not end happily, is important to Emma's self-education.

Emma modifies her ideas of a desirable marriage. She had considered the marriage of Harriet and Mr. Elton to be a possibility because she believed that love had the power to induce a man such as Mr. Elton to forget Harriet's illegitimate birth and uncertain social status. Mr. Elton's rejection of Harriet and subsequent, rapid engagement and marriage to Augusta Hawkins, with her dowry of ten thousand pounds, teaches Emma the importance of economic and social considerations. After the Eltons' marriage, Emma seems, for a time, to have adopted Mr. Elton's mercantilistic approach. For example, in the following passage she considers the economic and social advantages of a marriage to Frank Churchill and ignores any consideration of emotions such as love.

She had frequently thought--especially since his father's marriage with Miss Taylor--that if she were to marry, he was the very person to suit her in age, character and condition. He seemed by this connection between families, quite to belong to her. She could not but suppose it to be a match that everybody who knew them must think of. (118-19)

When Frank does appear on the scene, he seems to be all that Emma had dreamed he would be, and, for a time, she is pleased to think that she may be in love with him. Emma's feelings of possibly being in love with Frank are "a state

of mind, the titillating effect of which she analyzes, probes, and extends in economical proportions" (Duffy 49). She is fascinated by what she may be feeling, but she does not want to become too emotionally involved. She thinks:

Every consideration of the subject, in short, makes me thankful that my happiness is not more deeply involved.--I shall do very well again after a little while--and then, it will be a good thing over; for they say everybody is in love once in their lives, and I shall have been let off easily.

(265)

The reader, and eventually Emma herself, realizes that "being in love" with Frank was, in reality, just a game Emma was playing with herself, just a mental exercise.

Emma's perception of marriage must undergo yet another change before she attains a mature, realistic view of marriage. She has moved from an awareness that the emotions are not to be ignored to a pragmatic acceptance of the considerations of wealth and status. But neither would provide a satisfactory basis for the kind of marriage Emma would desire. Emma must learn that marriage involves even more. This does not happen until Emma recognizes her emotional involvement with her "Mr. Right," Mr. Knightley. However, before Emma can conceive of the possibility of marriage to Mr. Knightley, her perception of him must change, and she must recognize her feelings for him as love.

At the beginning of the novel she sees him as "a loveable and commanding fixture in her life--a private idol or household god" (Duffy 44). Emma and Mr. Knightley have retained the relationship which was established when Emma was a child; therefore, it is not surprising that "neither is able to contemplate the other as a possible lover" (Monaghan, Jane Austen: Structure and Social Vision 115). When Emma does experience some awareness of her feeling for Mr. Knightley, she tries to attribute her emotional responses to their "brother-sister" relationship. Not until she is confronted with the possibility of Mr. Knightley's marrying Harriet Smith or Jane Fairfax does Emma finally recognize the depth of her own love for him. At this point she reaches a mature perception of what the relationship between a husband and wife ought to be; she understands what marriage really involves and begins to desire it for herself.

It is not surprising that Emma would have difficulty in seeing marriage as a desirable goal since she does not have any model of satisfying marriages. In Emma, there is "a virtual absence of any perception of marriage per se as a fulfilling experience" (Brown, "The Business of Marrying and Mothering" 28). Communication, respect, and affection are all necessary if the marriage of Emma and Mr. Knightley is to be more satisfying than the other marriages in the novel. The other marriages seem to lack one or more of these

qualities. Her marriage might do for Isabella, but Isabella is "the conventional devoted wife"--engrossed in her family, coddling her children, humouring a taciturn husband, having no will or opinions of her own (Strimpel 292). Emma's personality is very different from that of her sister. Neither is Emma like the quiet, docile Anne Taylor, who is well aware of her good fortune in marrying at all, especially a man with the wealth and geniality of Mr. Weston. Mr. Weston may be (as John Knightley describes him) "rather an easy, cheerful man, than a man of strong feelings; [who] takes things as he finds them, and makes enjoyment of them somehow or other" (96), but Emma decides that these qualities have a cumulatively irritating effect on her and that she would never be happy if married to a man like Mr. Weston.

If she had been willing to settle for only economic security and status, Emma might have considered Frank Churchill more acceptable as a marriage partner. Like his father's, Frank's personality is a major weakness as far as Emma is concerned. Joseph Duffy aptly describes Frank as "an archetype of all clever young men who live by their wits and their charm, whose amiability and good looks are their chief commodities, whose end in life is pleasure, and who do not flinch at swindle in order to attain this end"; he is "a paragon of confidence men" (48-49). Frank's selfish, childish nature leaves little doubt that his marriage to

Jane Fairfax will not be a serene one. Jane is marrying a man who is morally and intellectually her inferior; and while Jane clearly loves Frank and there is no indication by Austen that the marriage is likely to fail, we wonder how happy Jane will be. We share Mr. Knightley's reaction; he predicted, "Jane, Jane, you will be a miserable creature" (426). How unhappily Austen herself viewed the marriage is suggested by her telling her family that Jane Fairfax would have died only nine or ten years after her marriage to Frank Churchill (Austen-Leigh 307).

Emma also could not use the Eltons' marriage as a model, even though both Mr. and Mrs. Elton might believe that they have an "ideal" marriage. Mrs. Elton might represent herself as a heroine "willing to sacrifice the delights of Maple Grove for love, and Elton as a frantic, despairing lover" (Moler 177), but Emma is not deceived. Emma knows that in reality Mrs. Elton married for an establishment and Mr. Elton was motivated by pique and by Mrs. Elton's dowry of ten thousand pounds. The Eltons might suit each other perfectly but the novel makes it very clear that they are both "affected, mercenary, vulgar, and aggressive" people (Barbara Hardy 33).

The marriage of Emma and Mr. Knightley is appropriate when it is seen as the final evidence of Emma's maturation as well as the ending required by the comic form. Emma's experiences, observations, and maturation have led her to

realize what marriage to the right man might have to offer her. The marriage is Emma's reward for the changes she undergoes, changes which will be permanent because for Emma, "the discovery of sexual love is the beginning of true goodness, since it removes her inclination to have fantasies about and to manipulate other people" (Wiseman 15).

Emma's relationship with Mr. Knightley may seem strange to modern readers. We expect a more passionate involvement from the hero and heroine of a "love story." However, such expectations may reflect only modern perceptions of love; we expect an emphasis on emotions whereas Emma and Mr. Knightley seem to stress their pupil and teacher roles. Juliet McMaster suggests that this is because Jane Austen saw the "ideal" love differently. She believes that Austen was committed to "intelligent love," of which the deepest and truest relationship between human beings is pedagogic; such a relationship is based on giving and receiving knowledge about right conduct, for formation of one person's character by another, and the acceptance of another's guidance on one's growth (Jane Austen on Love 43). McMaster suggests that Austen felt that the pedagogic relationship enabled the hero and heroine to respond to each other, fully and consciously, to come to share their experiences, their feelings, and themselves, so that they could be wholly united. Their marriage celebrates "the achieved integration of head and heart that is represented

by pupil and teacher coming to loving accord" (Jane Austen on Love 45)

The relationship of Emma and Mr. Knightley may not be as strictly pedagogical as McMaster suggests, however. John Hagan notes, "There is a much greater kinship in fallibility between Mr. Knightley and Emma than our initial impression of them as wise mentor and foolish pupil would suggest" (225). In the long run, the pupil acquires fuller self-knowledge than the mentor. There are also times when Emma's perceptions are more accurate than Mr. Knightley's. As Malcolm Bradbury points out, "Emma is not always in error; she is indeed right on nearly all the occasions where she is not given to the faults. . . of whimsy, snobbery, or prejudgment" (65). Mr. Knightley is also a faulty mentor since he is "as ignorant as Emma of his own feelings and, though many of his criticisms of her are just in themselves, he is often motivated by unconscious jealousy and envy of Frank Churchill" (Kirkham 133). Margaret Kirkham further suggests that Austen restricted Emma's faults to "relatively minor matters," so that she was "essentially right in her judgments and feelings on a great many important matters" (131). In addition, Emma's maturation seems to have relied more on her experiences and her evaluations than it did on Mr. Knightley's wisdom and advice.

Even though Emma and Mr. Knightley may have thought that they had an ideal pedagogic relationship, the modern



reader may interpret it differently. In the proposal scene (and also during much of Emma's previous maturation) there is little evidence that Mr. Knightley is aware of the changes in Emma's thinking. Hagan points out: "There is not the slightest suggestion in the scene that the proposal is contingent in any way upon his approval of [Emma's] growth" (560). Mr. Knightley's decision, "far from being the result of the cool deliberation of a reasoned recognition and acceptance of her maturation, springs entirely from impulse" (560). Mr. Knightley says that he loves Emma "in spite of her unlovable behavior, warts, and all" (Bennett 249).

Emma's experiences enable her to gain wisdom, thereby making her more nearly the equal of Mr. Knightley. This new equality serves as the basis for open communication, mutual respect, and deep affection. These qualities are significant, LeRoy Smith says, because:

Austen insists that the happiness of the individual requires both self-knowledge, represented by the discovery and integration within the self of the range of possibilities of human behavior, and concord between the sexes, represented by the dissolution of artificial social and psychological barriers. (142)

Emma's experiences and increasing maturity also affect her relationship with people other than Mr. Knightley. As

John Halperin points out, Emma must come to realize that, like most people, she is capable of being deceived, of making mistakes in judgment, and of perceiving incorrectly ("The Victorian Novel and Jane Austen" 21); such realizations lead Emma to a better understanding of herself, an understanding which helps to prepare the way for a better understanding of others. An important part of Emma's growth is her increasing involvement with those around her, an involvement which adds a social dimension to Emma's maturity. Emma's conscious decision to marry Mr. Knightley indicates her mature willingness to involve herself in her society in a fully human way (Seifert 80). Emma presents a "unifying view that combines the achievement of self-hood by the individual with an accommodation of the legitimate demands of self and society" (Smith 25).

All of Austen's novels contain an emphasis on the place of the individual in society. Austen emphasizes the importance of marriage as a public act, which is why she does not condone the secret engagement of Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax. Austen's message is that the public has a right to know of such engagements because of the possible public and social consequences. In a paternalistic society, who marries whom affects not only their families but also the neighborhood; thus this type of society placed a heavy emphasis on the individual's obligation to recognize the needs of others and to strive to meet those needs (Monaghan,

Structure and Social Vision 2). Mary Poovey describes the marriages of the heroines of Austen's novels as "the ideal paradigm of the most perfect fusion between the individual and society" (203). When seen in this way, the marriage of Emma and Mr. Knightley also seems an appropriate conclusion to the novel.

Nevertheless, the ending still leaves some readers feeling uneasy. Bernard Paris, for example, will accept that Emma has changed permanently. However, he does not feel that Emma's assumption of the role of Mr. Knightley's wife is a change for the better. In his psychological analysis of Emma, Paris concludes that Emma's marriage to Mr. Knightley "signifies not so much an entrance into maturity as a regression to childish dependency" (65). As he sees it, Emma undergoes a gradual change in attitude toward herself from pride to humility, from self-aggrandizement to self-castigation, from self-delusion to self-knowledge. He concedes that Emma learns from her experiences and makes a better adaption to her society; she discovers the independence of external reality and gains a knowledge of her inability to control it; she is also forced to give up her narcissistic claims and to recognize the immorality of many of her attitudes. However, Paris feels that Emma does not gain a mature, independent self-confidence. He notes that at the beginning of the novel Emma is an unusual figure in her world, but that "by the end she has the feminine

personality which was most commonly induced and most strongly approved by the society of her time" (76-77). Paris is also critical of Mr. Knightley as the proper husband for Emma. He feels that Mr. Knightley will, indeed, keep her wayward impulses under control, but he will not help her to grow. Paris does not feel that marriage to Mr. Knightley will allow Emma to live up to her full potential.

Other critics are uncomfortable with Jane Austen's writing technique at the end of the novel. They have noted that Jane Austen seems to step away at the climax of the novel, that as she reaches the point at which a great romantic scene is imminent, she enters the novel, almost in her own person. For example, T. Mildred Wherritt says, "After Austen has built up the suspense to the point at which the hero is ready to propose, she generalizes, paraphrases and comments on the proposal, but she does not render the scene in dialogue or direct description" (229). This has the effect of suddenly placing the author between the reader and the story.

Some critics are satisfied that this intrusion is considered part of the author's technique. Rachel Brownstein, for example, feels that the distance at this point is a conscious choice on the part of the author rather than an indication of artistic weakness, and that "it makes our pleasure" (85). Janis Stout concurs; she believes that the entrance of the author at this point was intended to

"suspend the dramatization of events leading up to the romantic climax, a presentation developed largely through close-grained dialogue, and to shift instead to indirect discourse, or more often, narrative summary" (317). She believes that by doing this, Austen "renews her character-istic reliance on generalization, a practice which stresses the shared, common qualities of the characters' experiences and which engages our participation or assent as readers while disengaging us from highly charged particulars" (317). Stout adds:

The practice is thematically right, converging as it does both Jane Austen's faith in the continuity between the individual's personal interests and those of society and her stress on the moral value of a widened perspective, even as it is dramatically disappointing to the emotionally involved reader. (317)

Since dialogue is Austen's normal means for revealing her characters, the lack of dialogue at the denouement denies the reader a realistic look at her hero and heroine at the culmination of their romance. Stout defends Austen's practice by saying that Austen purposely contrasts the nearly speechless love and proposal scenes against the sheer spokenness of sequences involving other matters (321). She says:

When Austen's characters most need to communicate

with one another, they dare not place their confidence in the primary medium of communication, conversation. What is more, she doubts the integrity of those who are able to remain fluent, flowery, or verbose in such situations. (323)

Some critics believe that Austen purposely resorts to obviously contrived endings because she does not take the romance seriously. Whertritt suggests, "For her the conventions and ideas of the romantic novels are materials to be satirized and burlesqued" (242). Margaret Kirkham would agree with this; she feels that the endings were written in such a way as to direct readers "not to mistake what is represented for a straightforward imitation of life itself" (81). She says:

The final precipitation of the marriage by Mr. Woodhouse's anxieties about a local poultry thief, is plainly intended to be taken lightly. While it fits perfectly with his character, the author expects us to enjoy the joke as she finds a piece of comic business without which the book cannot be ended. I think that the reader is also supposed to see by this time what the schematic structure has been, and how an unlikely, even an absurd, plot has been worked upon so that it does not violate nature or probability. At this point, if not before, we are to stand back from the fiction

and its characters--to experience the mild alienation which results from being shown the constructional nuts and bolts--and, as we see that there was never any possibility of things working out in any other way, to ask what this particular handling of stock situation shows us about it.

(125)

Jane Austen intends the marriage to function as a literary convention which symbolizes the successful maturation of the relationship between the hero and heroine. The marriage of Emma and Mr. Knightley was not intended to suggest that there would be "perfect happiness" for Emma and Mr. Knightley in the future. She did not intend to present the marriage as a guarantee of happiness. Jane Austen knew that in the world of reality

there are no ideal couples, no instant understandings, no shapely resolutions. . . . There are no perfect lovers either. One of the continuous concerns of her novels is to expose those who think, or pretend to think, that there are. And if there are no perfect couples, there are also no perfect endings. (Morgan, In the Meantime 17)

But her stories are not required to be entirely consistent with reality. She knew that, whether she personally endorsed the institution of marriage or not, the comic form,

the story's theme, and the romance plot all demanded that the story end with a happy marriage.

We may recall again the question with which we began, Emma asking her father, "My dear papa, you are no friend of matrimony and therefore why should you be so anxious to pay your respects to a bride?" (265), and we might ask Jane Austen, "You have no delusions about marriage and what it means for a woman's life and freedom, so why do you have Emma marry Mr. Knightley?" I believe that she sanctions the marriage for the same reason that Mr. Woodhouse has when he pays due respects to the bride, even though he personally is appalled by the idea of marriage. No reader should believe that Austen was unaware of the problems in marriage and of the unlikelihood of a perfect marriage. The marriage of Emma and Mr. Knightley, however, is her tribute to the couple's mature relationship and to the endorsement it signifies of the social order.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The young women who are the focus of this study would have belonged to a "middling" class; they were neither high nor low, neither the rulers nor the ruled. While the situation of such women may represent the situation of only a minority of women in the early 1800's, it is, nevertheless, significant. The values reflected are those of a class which was just beginning to increase rapidly in numbers. The lives of most of Austen's female characters are typical of the lives which more and more women aspired to have.

<sup>2</sup> Emma (London: Oxford UP, 1933), 265. All page references to Austen's novels are to the Chapman editions: The Novels of Jane Austen, (London: Oxford UP, 1933). All future references will be included in the text.

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JANE AUSTEN, MARRIAGE, AND EMMA

by

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AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S REPORT

submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

College of Arts and Sciences

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY  
Manhattan, Kansas

1987

As is true of all Jane Austen's novels, marriage is at the core of Emma. The novel's ending, with its three marriages, and its presentations of the alternatives to marriage for a young woman of the "middle" class, would seem to suggest that the novel is a tract urging all to marry. However, the novel's heroine has no economic or social motives to marry, and the marriages shown or described in the novel provide little incentive for Emma to marry. Why, then, does Emma marry Mr. Knightley? The answer is first sought in the novel itself, in what Emma herself thinks and says about marriages in general, possible marriage partners, the marriages of others, and what she would want in her own marriage if she were to marry. Emma's ideas are compared with those of Jane Austen as revealed in her letters, particularly five letters written to her niece Fanny at approximately the same time Austen was writing Emma. More significant to the novel than Austen's or Emma's personal opinions of marriage, however, is the relationship of the marriage of Emma and Mr. Knightley to the theme of the novel. The marriage is appropriate as the ending of a comedy (which Emma is since it ends with a resolution of conflict), but it is even more appropriate as Emma's reward for what she has become. Emma's experiences have prepared her to take her proper role in society, that of a mature woman, the wife of a man who will contribute to the continuation of that society.